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ABSTRACT

The communication skills believed to be relevant to a successful career in the business world and the organizational communication program in the Department of Communication at Central Missouri State University (CMSU) are the two major focuses of this paper. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of identifying factors that might enhance employability, the importance of communication skills in the modern world, communication skills thought to be important goals for managers, six factors critical to the employability of college graduates, ten types of communication skills important to job success, the instruction that should be included in speech communication courses, and unsolicited comments on the importance of communication skills from recent graduates with majors in communication. The second part of the paper contains general questions about the CMSU major in organizational communication management, a list of instructional skills objectives at the undergraduate and at the Master's level, and the purposes and general requirements for the internship program. (EL)

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# ENHANCING STUDENTS' EMPLOYABILITY QUOTIENT

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## ABSTRACT

This paper has two major purposes: (1) to examine from global, regional, and individual levels the kinds of skills employers and employees agree are critical in enhancing the employability of the college graduate; and (2) to present one programmatic answer to provide these skills.

Communication skills are shown to be the most vital skills to enhance employability. The role of personal qualifications, scholastic qualifications, specialized courses, part-time employment, and general, liberal arts courses in employability is addressed. Organizational communication, as a college major, is presented as one training background to meet stated needs in business, industry, education, and government.

## INTRODUCTION

According to a recent report of the College Placement Council, "Only half as many job offers have been made to graduating students this year as were made by the same date last year" ("Graduating Students," 1983). While employment opportunities may be slightly better in 1984, the problem of finding fulfilling employment is still a significant one. With 540,000 college graduates unemployed, 1.4 million students graduating from college this spring, and approximately 10,000,000 new college graduates being dumped on the labor force during the present decade, university students need to take special note of what can be done to enhance their employability. The problem is further aggravated by perhaps as much as 80 percent of the current labor force seeking more fulfilling jobs. Thus, a fresh college diploma is not a guarantee of employment. It would appear more than ever that faculty advisement roles with students concerning employment opportunities and what can be done to enhance employability are critical.

Those in public and private sector have a unique responsibility to monitor job growth potentials, to recognize relevant, related skills needed to secure future employment opportunities, and,

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importantly, to keep abreast of academic and training programs in their region that merit a solid recommendation.

It is ironic that there are solid and growing career opportunities in public, organizational, and mass communication that are relatively "undiscovered" by incoming freshmen until they are "exposed" in a general studies communication course or other related source. Unfortunately, by then most have declared a major, and have in mind a career plan. Considering the employment potential for well-prepared communication specialists and trainers, this delay is unfortunate.

As communication instructors, our consciousness has been raised regarding the importance of improving their employability quotient (EQ). Specifically, we believe that we have a responsibility to outline what skills we seek to develop in our communication majors that are relevant to future employment needs, and to encourage each vocational counselor to expose students during adolescence to such career options. Ultimately, we ask those in varied disciplines and professions to honestly and objectively make sure students are aware of career opportunities in organizational communication and related fields.

There are two major purposes for this paper: (1) to examine from a global, regional, and individual level the kinds of skills employers and employees agree are critical in enhancing the employability of the college graduate; and (2) to provide information about our organizational communication program at Central Missouri State University specifically designed to meet those needs.

## IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE MODERN WORK WORLD

A number of studies consistently identify the importance of communication skills, both oral and written, as vital to employability. In a recent survey--reported in a leading business communication journal--of top executives, chief executive officers, vice presidents and presidents, some interesting findings emerged. When asked what courses in the study of business administration best prepared persons for careers in general management, the respondents cited oral and written communication as the most important preparatory tools to their success (Hildebrandt et al., 1982). David Rockefeller's description of the chief corporate executive for the year 2000 suggests such a person must be "sensitive to public opinion and respectful of the public franchise over which he presides" and, in addition, "sensitive to the changing attitudes and aspirations of his work force" which would test the corporate executive's "human relation skills" (Madeline, 1980). Rockefeller anticipates the chief executive officer will spend increasingly more time "lobbying legislators, persuading dissident stockholders, and meeting face-to-face with special interest groups" (Madeline, 1980). Most importantly, the chief corporate executive at the turn of the century will have "a personal responsibility for advocacy, activism, and outspokenness," and must "represent articulately and coherently his company and industry to their critics" (Madeline, 1980). Thus,

the future as well as present role of communication is vital. It would appear the same communication skills would be applicable for entry-level skills as well.

Madeline (1980), referring to a writer in Fortune who discusses a major chemical firm's new public relations program, notes that the company chairman is spending a fourth of his time communicating with governmental, media, and public-interest groups, and that nearly 200 of the firm's managers now are giving speeches, lobbying, writing articles for op-ed pages of newspapers, and speaking out on issues affecting company concerns. Madeline (1980) notes:

> The ability to communicate clearly, effectively, persuasively--to gain understanding, and hopefully, allegiance--should be at the top of the list of skills developed by every careerist who wants to get anywhere near the top of most institutions in this country--government, business, education, what have you.

In an effort to improve management education for post secondary institutions and corporate management education programs, Robert Hahn (1982) of the Harvard Graduate School of Education has developed an "Inventory of General Learning Goals for Managers." Note the emphasis on communication skills in the top 10 ranking of 25 general learning goals in industry management education:

| Rank Order | General Learning Goals |
|---|---|
| 1.5 | To develop ability to interact easily and productively with others |
| 1.5 | To develop ability to think critically about received ideas |
| 3 | To develop ability to balance conflicting viewpoints |
| 4 | To develop ability to listen effectively |
| 5 | To develop ability to communicate ideas orally |
| 6 | To develop self-confidence and self-esteem |
| 7 | To develop tolerance and trust in relations with others |
| 8 | To develop self-awareness and self-understanding |
| 9 | To develop capacity for self-evaluation |
| 10 | To develop capacity for assuming responsibility |

The first nine of the top ten learning goals identified by Hahn are communication based. Thus, from an upper-management viewpoint, communication skills are very important!

Company recruiters looking for recent graduates to fill entry-level management positions consider certain factors essential for employability. The Endicott Report (1976) suggests recruiters visiting college campuses cite six factors as critical to the employability of college graduates. Each factor is listed in order of importance.

1. Personal qualifications, including maturity, initiative, enthusiasm, appearance, the ability to work with people, and effective communication, both oral and written.

2. Scholastic qualifications as shown by grades in all subjects or in a major field.

3. Specialized courses relating to a particular field of work.

4. Kind and amount of part-time and summer employment while in college.

5. Experience in campus activities, especially leadership and participation in extracurricular life.

6. General or liberal arts courses designed to provide a broad and cultural background.

These six factors are also supported by our Assistant Director of Placement at CMSU (Shirley Fulda, Personal Communication, September 28, 1983). Asked what they look for in job candidates beyond specific academic credentials and relevant work experience, recruiters cite communication skills as very important. The college relations manager for Travenol Laboratories notes, ". . . we place a very high degree of importance on communication skills. Verbal and written skills are essential for a successful career at our company" ("Wanted: Poise," 1981).

Thus far we have punctuated the general importance of a variety of communication skills to specific jobs. Perhaps these skills can best be identified in the DiSalvo, Larsen, and Seiler (1975) study aimed at identifying the skills needed by recent college graduates employed in business organizations. On the basis of their survey, the authors concluded that ten types of communication skills were important to job success: (1) advising, (2) persuading, (3) instructing, (4) interviewing, (5) routine information exchange, (6) public speaking, (7) small group leadership, (8) giving orders, (9) small-group problem solving, and (10) listening.

Hanna (1978) made an effort to discover (1) what should be stressed in speech communication courses not now stressed, (2) what should be deleted, and (3) what instruction should be continued with even greater emphasis. He summarized his findings by saying that for courses oriented to career training in the business world "communication skills involved in motivating people, delegating authority, listening, direction giving and group problem solving" must be emphasized (Hanna, 1978). Thus, communication skills are vital to entry-level and upper-management job functions. Moreoever, the evidence suggests that the kinds of communication skills reiterated over and over are precisely those in which communication majors are most proficient.

Unsolicited comments from recent graduates with majors in communication at CMSU further substantiate the importance of communication skills. One graduate writes: "I cannot tell you how much this position (Representative Tourism Development for City of Orlando, Florida) is like organizational communication . . . . I love it!" (Paula Foster, Personal Communication, 1982, September 21).

Another writes of his position as a Personnel Specialist for a major firm. He mentions that his responsibilities in recruitment and in interviewing and selecting persons for a number of positions within the firm are dependent on communication skills acquired in our program. He concludes by saying:

> I think you know, while students are at school they tend to take classes for granted and find it difficult to apply that knowledge to the business environment. I can't help but remember how insecure I felt about how Organizational Communication was going to apply. After being exposed to the "real" business environment I am convinced of the program's value and would somehow like to alleviate that insecurity in other Organizational Communication students. (Steve Sanders, Personal Communication, 1982, February 12)

A third student also writes testifying to the importance of communication skills in the business world of Wall Street:

> The situation I am in, is that I am working on Wall Street for the Toronto Dominion Foreign Exchange Banking firm. Over the summer I was hired temporarily to work until school started, at which time a position opened within the firm. Enticed with an excellent salary, and a growth position in Credit and Loan Administration, I accepted the offer. Although I obviously had no prior business experience, they were impressed with my interpersonal skills, which is a vital aspect of the job because of my interaction with various clientele from around the world. The business aspect of the position I am learning from scratch, and finding it a rewarding experience. It would be encouraging to mention to your present Speech Communication majors, that even in the business world of Wall Street, excellent communication skills are one of the most important aspects of a potential applicants strength when getting considered for a position. (Gregory V. Carter, Personal Communication, 1982, April 15)

A lawyer who completed our program writes of the importance of his background in speech communication:

> Perhaps more so than some other professions, the world of law is the world of communication. Mastery of writing and speech . . . [is a ticket] to great success. While my skills are somewhat less than a mastering of the art, the department's offerings of non-verbal audience adaptation, and public speaking were crucial to me and mandatory for good communication skills. It is also too bad that the prospective law student cannot repeat Argumentation and Debate several times, as anyone who envisions himself as a

courtroom advocate must deal with much the same things. (Victor A. Titus, Personal Communication, 1979, April 12)

A Loss Prevention Manager for Montgomery Ward writes:

> My responsibilities are for the security and safety of both employees and property . . . . I constantly use my communication education and feel it has been an asset to have . . . . I've found the debate class has enabled me to better defend my issues. To be honest with you, I wondered if I made the right choice of receiving a major in Organizational Communication. I don't have doubts anymore . . . . I know I made the right decision. (Richard Valdiviez, Personal Communication, 1983, April 21)

While it is not fair to claim a student's career lies in the hands of another, we, as educators, cannot shirk our responsibilities to students in informing them of the high correlation between communication skills and employability. A worker without competency in communication skills or the ability to work with people often will find his/her path to promotion blocked. If not employed, that worker will have greater problems acquiring fulfilling employment.

## NEEDED SKILLS: OUR RESPONSE

If the idea of majoring in a field such as communication raises several questions, one viable option is a major in organizational communication management. Normally resource persons are asked some of the following questions and need answers for their student clients regarding such a program.

1. What is Organizational Communication?

   Organizational communication is the study of the flow of messages within formal organizations, which includes the sending and receiving of messages between the organization and its divisions, between the organization and personnel and among personnel within the organization. An organizational communication specialist is essentially a communication manager--one who facilitates activities so as to encourage efficient and effective use of material, economic, and human resources.

2. What is the objective of the degree program?

   The objective is to prepare effective practitioners of communication in organizations. This person will be able to apply communication knowledge and skills to a wide range of administrative, managerial, and human relations situations. Examples include directing and maintaining efficient communication systems, providing in-service communication training to others, and advising managers in the use of efficient and effective communication procedures for serving in a management capacity.

3. What positions (jobs) do organizational communication majors obtain?

   Communication majors are prepared for management positions in business, industrial, or governmental agencies. Majors are particularly suited for entry positions in personnel, in-service training, sales or promotional work. Above all, interpersonal and/or public communication should be an essential job requisite. Recent graduates have been placed with such employers as Xerox, Bendix, Farmland Industries, Kansas City Power & Light, Silver Dollar City, Worlds of Fun, Harper & Row, Armour-Dial, a chamber of commerce, and the Kansas City Chiefs.

4. What are some of the advantages of the program?

   An emphasis in communication provides the graduate with tremendous flexibility. Many employers provide the specific training they desire for the particular jobs. However, typically they are not prepared to train employees in effective communication skills vital to job success.

5. What are practical minors to complement the major?

   Any minor which supports the interest of the student will complement a major in organizational communication. Suggested minors include management, marketing, business administration, psychology, mass communication, public relations, or sociology.

6. How does one get into the program?

   While procedures may vary from campus to campus, at CMSU students entering the program should have a 2.5 or above cumulative grade-point average on a 4.0 scale. An advisement checklist can be secured to aid the student. (This is available to the reader upon request.)

We would like to share with you a working list of instructional skills objectives we have for our majors who emphasize organizational communication and identify the specific courses in personal communication skills from which we develop these competencies.

Small Group Facilitation: Ability to develop and facilitate effective functioning of small groups within an organization, both in terms of accomplishing the group's task and establishing an atmosphere of cooperation within the group. (Introduction to Communication, Group Communication)

Interviewing: Ability to assess individual capabilities and establish rapport with potential employees, lead in giving appraisal, survey public attitudes, orient publics to new ideas, gather information, and report concisely. (Argumentation and Debate, Interviewing Principles and Practice)

Problem-Solving/Decision-Making: Ability to analyze problem, to make decisions concerning specific strategies to solve the problem, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these solutions. (Small Group Communication, Audience Adaptation, Speech Writing and Criticism)

Human Relations: Ability to establish communication which invites credibility, trust, and confidence among groups and persons within the organization. Ability to facilitate positive and productive relationships between co-workers and between members of various levels of an organization. Ability to communicate constructive praise and tactful criticism and to establish rapport and credibility with hostile individuals or those holding divergent or antagonistic points of view. (Improving Listening Abilities, Interpersonal Communication, Audience Adaptation, Nonverbal Communication, Theories of Interpersonal Communication)

Listening: Ability to receive, interpret, understand and respond to both verbal and nonverbal messages from clients or employees, in terms of both the information given and the feelings expressed. (Introduction to Communication, Improving Listening Abilities, Nonverbal Communication, Interviewing: Principles and Practice)

Persuasion: Ability to persuade clients or employees (as individuals or as groups) to accept a policy, believe a claim, or take a specific course of action, and to defend the position from attack. (Audience Adaptation, Presentational Speaking, Speech Writing and Criticism)

Motivation/Leadership Development: Ability to motivate others in a given job situation by being sensitive and responsive to their needs. (Small Group Communication, Interviewing: Principles and Practice)

Conflict Resolution: Ability to handle conflict between individuals or groups within an organization by diagnosing the conflict and selecting strategies to better manage the conflict. (Interpersonal Communication and Communication in Organizations)

Speaking Competence: Ability to think through, organize, and present information concisely and coherently in a variety of situations including presentations utilizing audio-visual resources. (Audience Adaptation, Presentational Speaking, Speech Writing and Criticism)

Preventing and Handling Rumors: Ability accurately to perceive, recall, and report visual and auditory messages to handle distorted messages. (Communication in Organizations)

Conducting Conferences: Ability to conduct meetings, coordinate group undertakings, maintain communication and understanding, and solve problems. (Small Group Communication, Special Projects in Speech--Communication Training)

Additional competencies/skills developed at the Master's level include the following:

Communication Analysis and Program Implementation: Ability to diagnose large or small organizational communication systems using survey, interviewing, or observational techniques and to identify strengths and weaknesses in human communication. Ability to conduct feedback sessions for small and larger groups of managers and other employees, to assist them in developing communication objectives and strategies for implementation, and to facilitate implementation of those strategies for improvement. Our courses Communication Assessment and Studies in Organizational Communication address these skill areas.

Training and Developing: Ability to design, implement, and evaluate training programs for team building and conflict resolution; for conference, meeting, and leadership skills; for public speaking and business presentations; for interpersonal communication, interviewing techniques, and appropriate nonverbal behavior. Our courses Presentational Speaking in Professional Settings and Communication Training develop competencies in this area.

Various Communication Services: Ability to serve as a resource person for line and staff personnel's communication needs, e.g. edit speeches, conduct backgrcund audience analysis, research ideas for presentations, suggest alternate delivery and presentation strategies, etc. Our graduate courses Professional Interviewing, Graduate Internship in Organizational Communication, and Communication in Organizations build upon competencies provided in our undergraduate program.

The capstone of our program is an internship. The purposes of the internship are as follows:

1. To provide the student with the opportunity to apply the theory and principles learned in the classroom and to gain the practical experience important to future employment.

2. To enable the intern sponsoring organization to contribute to the development of the profession by the guidance and counsel of future professional personnel.

3. To develop meaningful contact between the educational process and the professional practice.

The general requirements for the internship include these:

1. Each intern must be consistently supervised throughout her/his internship period. The preferred supervisor will be a person skilled in interpersonal and organizational communication.

2. At the end of each calendar week, the student intern must give a report to the faculty advisor, containing a work log of duties performed during the week and, in applicable, copies of written work produced. These reports will provide a basis for the intern's grade and will be retained for inclusion in

the final report, which becomes the property of the department. The faculty advisor may make evaluative recommendations to the intern concerning the intern's attitude, conduct, skills, and professionalism.

3. Contact will be maintained by the faculty advisor with the supervisor. This contact normally will include at least one, and preferably two, on-site conferences by the faculty advisor. Telephone conferences will be maintained as necessary.

4. Payment is not required for an intern; it is up to the individual and agency to agree on any compensation.

While it might be said that the organizational communication program, terminal skills, and internship procedures outlined may be unique to our students, a significant problem is identified and one viable solution presented.

## SUMMARY

In this paper we have identified the communication skills we believe are relevant to a successful career in the business world. We have also provided information about our organizational communication program in the Department of Communication at Central Missouri State University. We strongly urge our academic and business colleagues to share this information with university and potential graduate students so they can take courses vital to enhancing their employability quotient.

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